DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 679 CS 213 484

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TITLE Improving the Writing of Underachieving Ninth Graders through Peer Tutoring.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 43p.; Ed.D. Practicum, Nova University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Practicum Papers (043)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; Grade 9; *High Risk Students; High Schools; *Peer Teaching; Student Evaluation; *Student Motivation; *Tutoring; Writing Attitudes; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Writing Development

ABSTRACT

A practicum addressing the problems of low motivation and poor writing quality of 50 underachieving 9th-grade basic skills students is described in this report. The objectives were to increase motivation among the students and to improve the quality of their essay writing. Peer tutoring was used as a method for encouraging students to help each other improve their writing. Students were assigned nine essays to write in a 3-month period. Evaluations were done by fellow classmates, upper classmen, the Senior English teacher, and the Basic Skills teacher. Both conferencing and constructive written criticism were used for correction and improvement. Grading was accomplished by using a holistic scoring chart. Topics were chosen by the teacher in accordance with the state graduation examination so that the students would be well prepared at the time of testing. A plan was developed whereby each student had the opportunity to work with different partners, groups, and students from other classes. A survey assessed the students' attitudes about writing essays. Analysis of the data revealed that the participants' writing improved. Some attitudes about writing were also improved. The data in the practicum showed that self-esteem was enhanced when students worked together, a factor that caused their writing attitudes and abilities to improve. (One table is included; 22 references and 2 appendixes--containing the student questionnaire and a list of essay topics--are attached.) (Author/PRA)

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# Improving the Writing of Underachieving Ninth Graders Through Peer Tutoring

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Judith R. Gomer

Cluster XLIV

A Practicum 1 Report Presented to the
Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova University

1992

CS213484



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PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

This practicum took place as described.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*To Dr. Leonard Dunovant, Jr., who gave me the inspiration to go forth with this degree.*

*I would also like to thank Emilia Reginatto for her patience and assistance.*

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## ABSTRACT

Improving the Writing of Underachieving Ninth Graders Through Peer Tutoring. Gomer, Judith R., 1991: Practicum Report, Nova University. Ed. D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. Inservice Training/Middle School/Secondary School Teacher Education.

This practicum was designed to address the problem of the lack of desire to write and the poor quality of the writing of fifty underachieving basic skills students. The objectives were to increase motivation among the students and to improve the quality of their essay writing.

Peer tutoring was used by the writer as a method to encourage students to help each other improve their writing. Students were assigned nine essays to write in a three month period. Evaluations were done by fellow classmates, upper classmen, the Senior English teacher, and the Basic Skills teacher. Both conferencing and constructive written criticism were used for correction and improvement. Grading was accomplished by using a holistic scoring chart. Topics were chosen by the teacher in accordance with the state graduation examination so that the students would be well prepared at the time of testing.

The writer developed a plan whereby each student had the opportunity of working with different partners, groups, and students from other classes. A survey prepared by the writer considered the students' attitudes about writing essays.

Analysis of the data revealed that the participants' writing improved. Some attitudes about writing also improved. The data in the practicum showed that self esteem was enhanced when students worked together and that caused their writing attitudes and abilities to improve.


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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

## Description of Work Setting and Community

The work setting for the writer was ninth grade Basic Skills English classes in an inner city vocational high school. The students attend this school full time, however, their day is divided between academic and vocational subjects. Students come to this school because in most cases they have shown an interest in pursuing a vocational or technical trade. Some students come to this school because there are less instances of crime and discipline problems, others because friends or relatives went to the school, and some simply want to follow friends who are already attending the school.

The community served by this school system consists of four schools located throughout the county in a northeastern state. The school system is open to students throughout the county which contains the state's largest industrial city. Although the county contains twenty two communities consisting of various ethnic and financial backgrounds, the school tends to attract mostly the inner city youth.

The school system is publicly funded by the federal, state, and county educational allotments. It is governed by a Board of Chosen Freeholders and is run by a separate Board of Education whose members are chosen by the County Executive.

The student population involved consists of six ninth grades classes with a

total of fifty students, all underachievers who are at risk of failing the writing portion of the state mandated exam requirement for graduation. The students come from low socio-economic families. The population consists of 64% Puerto Ricans, 34% Afro-American, and immigrants from other Hispanic areas with less than 2% Caucasian students.

The school is located in a suburban area, however, the student use public transportation to get there. They live in homes that consist of public housing and rental apartments, and many experience inferior living conditions. At the time this practicum was being implemented, the neighborhood was experiencing an escalation of violence with weapons, street crime, and substance abuse.

The families are primarily single parent, mother and grandmother dominated homes. Many are receiving public welfare assistance and those families who do work are at lower level occupations. Most of the students' parents did not have a full high school education.

## The Writer's Work Setting and Role

The drop out rate of the school is between 20% and 25%; those that do drop out usually do so before completing 11th grade.

In 1991, the state exam was given to all ninth graders in the state. Although this district produced better marks than most other urban area schools in the state, the marks were still significantly lower than those in suburban and rural area community schools.

The writer is the Basic Skills English teacher for these students. Classes are held for forty two minute periods everyday. It is the teacher's responsibility to have the students ready to pass the state exam, The High School Proficiency

Test.

The teacher has been in the field of education since 1958, when she was graduated from college with a Bachelor of Arts Degree. She spent ten years teaching in elementary schools on various grade levels. Thirteen years have been spent teaching in the vocational school. She set up the English as a Second Language curriculum for the district, her expertise emanating from her Master's Degree which she pursued at a state college. The Basic Skills English domain has been her responsibility for the past five years.

## CHAPTER II

## STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

### Problem Description

The youngsters were at risk of failing the examination and thus they were placed in this basic skills class. The writing of these ninth graders were not up to accepted standards and if they did not receive help at the time, they risked failure on the eleventh grade High School Proficiency Test.

### Problem Documentation

Evidence of this problem was supported by interviews, student work, high school admission test scores, and the eighth grade teacher' evaluation.

A writing sample was required for admission to the high school entitled Why I Want To Attend A Vocational High School. Scores were given on a Holistic Scale (1-6), six being the highest score. Four was the passing score; these students averaged a score of three. Two students received a score of two, thirty six students received a three, and twelve students received a four.

The Holistic Scoring Grade Guide Bloom (1985) is used to measure the writing command quality that a student has when writing essays. A score is given from 1 to 6, depending upon the content of this work. A strong command of written language would earn a six. A score of six encompasses a good

opening and closing, relates to the topic, is developed and organized logically and is highly effective. There are very few errors in word usage and sentence construction is of superior quality. The language mechanics would be almost perfect.

On the other end of the scoring grid is one, which shows inadequate command of written language. The essay would not likely have an opening or closing. There would be minimal response to the topic. The paper would be disorganized and be hard to follow. The focus of the paper would likely have to be inferred with either inappropriate or barely apparent details. A sense of planning would be missing and word usage would be poor. The sentence construction and mechanics would be incomplete, incorrect. and errors would be so severe that they would detract from the meaning of the essay.

In between, the following scores would indicate: 5 - generally strong command of written language, 4 - sufficient command, 3 - partial command, 2 - limited command.

The essays are marked by two readers. If they do not agree within one point, a third reader is required. This is the method employed in marking the High School Proficiency Test (N. J. 1990) by the State Department, however, for this study the essays were marked only by the practicum writer.

The eighth grade report cards were part of the criteria used for placement in the Basic Skills Class. These marks showed that the fifty students did not average above a "C" in English for the entire year. Thirty two students received a final grade of "C" and eighteen students received a "D". A grade of "C" indicated a lower than average acceptability for General English classes in this high school. Using this criteria, the eighth grade teacher placed them in classes where they would receive more individualized help.

The report cards and the Individual Student Improvement Plans (ISIP) indicated which skills they lacked and which skills the ninth grade teachers needed to tackle.

When asked in personal interviews what they liked least about English classes, 34 of the 50 students answered, "Writing." They cited the following reasons for liking to write:

a- "It is boring."

b- "It takes too long."

c- "It uses up too much thinking."

d- "You have to correct too many mistakes."

e- "It's not too exciting."

f- "There is no action."

g- "I usually have no reason to write. If there was a reason, I wouldn't mind writing." (This statement confirms what Graves (1983) contends, that children must be shown a need for their writing.)

## Causative Analysis

It is the writer's belief that there were many reasons for the problem.

1. Most of the students came from minority homes where there were many anti-academic values.
2. There were listening and reading problems among the students which affect writing skills as well.
3. Many of the students had short attention spans.
4. The students did not possess problem solving skills.
5. Many of the students had developed poor work habits.

6. Some inner city youth are constantly being exposed to drugs.

7. There were some unconcerned teachers.

8. Students were unable to relate the need for school subjects with their personal lives.

9. Many teachers, even concerned teachers, had not kept abreast of the latest teaching methods in order to enhance learning. Although in-service training was available, it was not used beneficially.

10. Very often, teaching strategies were not in line with the learning styles of the students. Instead, the teacher's personal style preference was employed.

11. In some school districts, budget cuts prohibit supplying classes with all the necessary tools for successful teaching.

12. Motivation must be supplied by the teacher in order to bring about interest in writing. It also must be carried across the curriculum. Too many times it is left only to the English teacher to teach the basic skills.

## Relationship of the Problem to Literature

Review of the literature gives evidence that there are many reasons why children do not write well.

Gonzalez (1990) cites an increase in minority and immigrant youngsters in the American schools. In urban areas there are perhaps 80% to 90% non Anglo-students in the classroom. Some of these students are coming to school from parents who are very caring but they do not have the know-how to supply an educational background for their children. This reflects the background of the students attending this school.

According to McGuire (1990), some underachieving writers are from families

who distrust schools. Their anti-academic values have an effect on their children which very often show up when they discuss things that occur in their homes.

McGuire (1990), believes that "an individual's progress in the writing hierarchy is not unlike an individual's progress through Maslow's hierarchy" (p.19). A child needs security and trust before he can achieve high levels of learning and that is why inner city minorities first have to gain security in the classroom before they can be expected to write.

When a student does not know his basic skills, Lindsley (1990) believes he will have no way to relate his need for writing or any school work with his own personal life. Lindsley confers that minority homes, with too little money, too little space, and too many kids, do not breed reasons for a child to see a need for anything school-related. He is too encompassed with the need for survival skills.

In the search of the literature, the following topical areas were touched upon: writing, peer tutoring, collaborative and cooperative learning strategies, underachievement and at-risk students, minority and urban education and bilingual education.

## CHAPTER III

## ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

### Goals and Expectations

The goal of the writer is that the student will improve their writing ability. The increase in student motivation will bring about better quality work which will produce longer and more interesting essays.

### Expected Outcomes

1. The students will enjoy the writing process to the point where they will want to write because they like to write and not because they are required to write.

2. By the end of the implementation period, the students' writing ability will show that they mastered an understanding of what constitutes a well written narrative essay. This will be accomplished by attaining Holistic scores of four or more.

3. The writer anticipates all freshmen enjoying writing more than they did when they entered ninth grade. This will be shown by a survey of questions which the students will answer at the end of the implementation period. (See Appendix). At that time the students will have gained many of the basic skills that caused them to be placed in an individualized program.

4. By the end of the implementation period, the students will have the ability

to pass the writing portion of the High School Proficiency Test.

## Measurements of Outcomes

Each time that an essay was written, it was marked according to the Holistic Grading Score Grid. The program succeeded as the writer had anticipated because more than half of the students improved their scores by the end of the first month. Successive weeks showed that the remaining students improved their grades. By the end of the implementation period, all the students had improved their grades to the point where they would be able to attain the required four in order to pass the High School Proficiency Test.

It was necessary to grade the essay using this method so that the students would have a well defined measure of their progress. Since the school uses an A, B, C, D, F marking system, it was difficult for the students to comprehend this evaluation. In time, they became accustomed to the switch; they understood that it was necessary as this is the format by which the State evaluates on the examination.

The Senior Class Write Team was also used as an aid to improving and analyzing the quality of the essays. The Senior Class English teacher gave a written summation regarding the quality of the essays.

The writer kept a record of events throughout the implementation period. Any population changes (Transfers, drop outs, or long term absences) were recorded. There were a few changes over the period but they did not affect the implementation in any way.

Holidays which required school closing and vacation periods were accounted for when planning the calendar. There was one snow day but no unexpected events that could affect the results of the implementation.

# CHAPTER IV

# SOLUTION STRATEGIES

## Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

Some students enter ninth grade without sufficient background in English basic skills. This lack of skills puts them at the risk of failing the essay writing portion of the High School Proficiency Test.

One of the possible solutions that the writer gleaned from the literature was the process of peer tutoring. Reed (1990) suggests that a group of upper classmen called The Write Team edit papers for the classroom teacher. They act as coaches for ninth graders and thus help the teacher and the students.

Allowing peers to evaluate, but not grade, the writing of their fellow classmates is advocated by Kearns (1991) as a method of improving writing. Peer tutoring can be a very constructive tool used as a class, a group, or in partners, says Schwartz (1991). Liftig (1990) feels that peer tutoring is good so long as students give complimentary comments in positive phrases as well as critical commentary.

In an experiment performed by Berliner (1990), it was found that the group which did their writing in peer groups did better than the group that followed traditional instruction.

Students must be thoroughly versed in the art of peer tutoring before they are expected to attempt doing it. The teacher must set down the rules which are to be followed.

Instruction for writing must be pursued by all disciplines. Each teacher must cooperate because writing is a procedure that can't take place only in English class.

Youngsters must have an audience for their writing and that's why Nelson (1991) says that kids' writing should be seen by classmates and not only by the teacher. Abbot (1989) advocates letting the students talk about their ideas, get into groups and brainstorm and let them write their ideas on the blackboard. They like to share and these are good pre-writing activities.

Cohen (1990) prescribes learning centers for underachievers so that they can work together and help each other. She feels that working in groups is especially good for challenging populations like inner city minorities and bilingual and academically heterogeneous settings. Wentworth (1990) suggests that teachers get over the "my kids could never do this" syndrome and let them work harder to achieve what most people think that underachievers are not capable of doing.

Caulkins (1983) is a great advocator of process writing, an approach that focuses on what children want to communicate. She believes in starting children writing at a very early age. She feels that this is very important because writing reinforces reading skills which are of course necessary for life. The new eleventh grade High School Proficiency Test in New Jersey will focus more on critical thinking skills. Caulkin says that process writing is a skill which creates in children, the ability to think coherently.

Children's writing, right from the beginning, can be reflected in recipe books, signs/books for dolls, and posters; Caulkins usually likes them to add illustrations to go with the writing. She believes a crucial part of the writing process is the "group share" as children need an audience for their writings. This

is a precursor of peer evaluations. She feels that the pride of authorship comes first and the refinement of grammar, spelling, and punctuation will come in due time.

Process writing fits in with today's approach to the "whole language" program. Caulkin's philosophy is that people write to communicate and writing is an act of power. Her writing process builds on whatever knowledge the children have when they start kindergarden. Children should be encouraged to have writing projects and should write every day for at least an hour so that soon it becomes as routine as talking. Their projects must have meaning to them such as writing posters for a school play or a school sale.

All over the country teachers are trying to emulate Atwell's methods. One method which certainly has value to anyone contemplating peer tutoring is turning to a fellow student to tell him about what he is going to write about. First he takes the role of speaker, and then that of listener.

Atwell (1981) says that children can be self motivated to choose their own topics to write about but they do need the teacher's guidance. The best guidance a teacher can give is to show that she too likes to write. The free choice of topics by students makes correcting papers more interesting for teachers.

Writing journals to other students rather than to the teacher is another innovation of Atwell, again geared toward peer help.

Atwell's reluctance to using work books encourages children to use writing for real life situations where they have more meaning. Students are able, through conferencing and workshops, to correct their own mistakes and they can make productive suggestions about how they can help one another.

In order to succeed in getting children to be good writers as teenagers,

according to Harste (1984), they must start the writing process so young that their knowledge of language and using it is shown in their scribbling and in their pretending to write. He feels that often, boring assignments in school, squelch the child's acquired knowledge.

One of the biggest mistakes teachers make, says Graves (1985), is that children are geared towards assignments from workbooks where they circle, underline, and choose answers rather than doing practical writing experiences which encourage thinking. He fears that we should not mis-use computers in the same fashion.

Graves suggests that teachers stop underestimating what children are capable of accomplishing. He worked with inner-city, disadvantaged students who have been found to enjoy classical writing just the same as their affluent counterparts. If these youngsters are motivated to do more, they will develop a positive attitude towards their abilities. As far as encouragement from peers, he believes that when children listen to one another they see that peers are good resources for learning.

Graves (1983) contends that when children brainstorm ideas with others before writing, they also learn the important skill of listening. As a child listens to another, he remembers similar experiences and thus he is helped to choose topics. Peer sharing should include parents and administrators.

## Description of Solution Selected

In planning to improve the writing of the students, the writer believed that the peer tutoring, collaborative approach would be good for her students because of proven studies in learning and teaching strategies. Ramariz (1971) attests to the fact that inner city youth are usually from large families and from neighborhoods

which have people living in close proximity. They are accustomed to working and playing closely with others, rather than alone. They need an open classroom or one in which there is freedom to interact with one another.

## Report of Action Taken

The plan for peer tutoring was done in different stages.

Before any work was done with peer tutoring, days were spent preparing for the concept - what peer tutoring means, how it functions, the responsibilities of the teacher, the responsibilities of the students, and how they were to relate to each other. When students get together they must know their objectives and each must have a responsibility or peer tutoring will become a social gathering. When the teacher was convinced that every student was well prepared to start collaborative learning they progressed to the period of implementation. In each group a leader and a recorder were chosen each time in order to have everybody participate. The implementation period took place from January 20, 1992, until April 30, 1992. In February and April there were vacations when school was closed.

Stage 1 was an introductory form. The students worked with only one partner or peer. In the partnership they were supposed to help each other by brainstorming ideas, talking, and sharing, and then writing. The topic was chosen by the teacher in order that the students be well prepared for the State examination. They were to confer with each other regarding content, grammar, and general editing.

At the beginning, the students seemed to flounder. When they got together with a partner, many seemed to sit quietly, not knowing how to begin talking. Boys and girls who were always talkative suddenly seemed at a loss for words.

The teacher had to become a mediator in the partnership to show them how to start the conversation. After a few meetings, the procedure began to develop and the students caught on to the idea.

Stage 2 followed the same format, but this time it was performed within a group of four or five students within the same class. By now the procedure was well established, however, the larger the group, the more tempting was the idea of gathering to socialize and deviate form the assignment at hand. The teacher had to circulate among the groups to assure that the students were staying on task. By now, conversation came easily and the groups enjoyed the interaction. At this point they were only up to their third essay but the grades already showed a definite improvement. The teacher complimented them profusely in order to encourage their efforts.

Stage 3 was attempted on a class level where the student was able to go before an audience. The literature said this was so important to children. As each student had an opportunity to go before the class and read his essay, the teacher filmed the performance. At the end, classmates gave both complimentary and corrective criticism but it had to be given in a constructive manner. Most students enjoy seeing themselves on TV, so it had a positive effect. There were three students who were shy and did not want to be involved. Since one of the objectives of the practicum was to improve the desire for writing essays, nobody was forced to do anything that did not want to do.

In Stage 4, an interaction between classes was attempted. Because the writer had six periods of Basic Skills classes each day, the collaborative approach was with classes from another period. In some cases the students knew each other and in some they did not know each other. This was an easy

feat to accomplish because ordinarily the students ask the previous class, "What did you do in class today?" Since they always like to know what to expect, the procedure fell right into line.

The final, Stage 5, was the long awaited culmination. The students knew that they would be evaluated by the "Write Team". The "Write Team" as described in the literature review, was selected from the Senior English Classes. They were to review their work with them. The purpose of this was that the Seniors had already passed the examination and therefore knew what to expect. They were able to tell them what was and what was not acceptable writing. The Senior English teacher also offered her commentary.

The teacher enlisted the support of the Basic Skills Supervisor, the principal, and the parents. Teachers of other disciplines, including the vocational shop instructors were called upon to employ this method when writing took place in their classroom.

Week 1: The first essay of the term was reviewed: Why I Chose to Attend A Vocational School. The Holistic Grading Chart was discussed. Students were made aware of what each grade (1-6) meant, so that they knew what to strive for.

Week 2 : Students were introduced to the concept and structure of peer tutoring. The teacher set up the rules, the goals and objectives and the format. Each student knew what his role was in peer tutoring. Students were introduced to the task of maintaining a daily journal of their written thoughts. This was to be monitored by their peers.

Weeks 3, 4, and 5: By now the students were ready to start their first experience in peer tutoring. They worked with:

Partner 1 - Week 3

Partner 2 - Week 4

Partner 3 - Week 5

The essays were: My Favorite Teacher, All About Me, and The Time I Persuaded Somebody To Do Something. The teacher was available at all times for conferencing, advising, and general help.

Weeks 6 and 7: The same procedure was attempted employing groups of four or five within the classroom. The teacher was always available as with the partnerships.

The essays were: The Business I Want To Own Someday and A Scary Thing Happened.

Weeks 8 and 9: Essay writing was shared before the class as an audience. This was the time that they were video taped. Students were reminded that complimentary comments, as well as corrective commentary were helpful and necessary.

The essay was: Learning Something From A Younger Person.

Weeks 10 and 11: The essays were disseminated among the five Basic Skills classes. Because the students did not have direct contact, written commentary about the work took place. This afforded an additional outlet for writing. The essay

was: Letters To The Editor (about current topics in the news). The letters were sent to the local newspaper where some were published. This gave the class an extra incentive to write. The literature from Atwell told us that children must have a purpose for their writing if it is to have meaning to them.

Week 12: "The Write Team", which was chosen from the Senior students worked collaboratively with the Freshmen in order to offer experienced commentary.
The final essay was: Telling About A Personal Accomplishment.

Week 13: The final week of the implementation period was devoted to review of the program, evaluation of the writing, and feedback from the students.

Topics for each week's writing were chosen by the teacher even though the literature suggested that children like to choose their own topics. This was necessary because samples were chosen from past examinations of the High School Proficiency Test. The essays are always narratives and the students needed the practice so that they would be able to pass the examination.

Every week, the marks showed a definite improvement as seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1 - Essays and Scores

| Essay # | Essay Title | HOLISTIC SCORE 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Why I Chose To Attend A Vocational School | | 6 | 4 | 40 | | |
| 2 | My Favorite Teacher | | 6 | 26 | 18 | | |
| 3 | All About Me | | 6 | 35 | 9 | | |
| 4 | I Persuaded Somebody To Do Something | | | 4 | 19 | 24 | |
| 5 | The Business I Want To Own Someday | | | 14 | 22 | 10 | |
| 6 | A Scary Thing Happened | | | 22 | 23 | 4 | |
| 7 | Learning Something From A Younger Person | | | 7 | 22 | 16 | |
| 8 | Letters To The Editor (About Current Concerns) | | | 1 | 22 | 23 | |
| 9 | Telling About A Personal Accomplishment | | | 2 | 18 | 27 | |

## CHAPTER V

## RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Results

The problem was that the students did not like to write and that which they did write was of poor quality, both grammatically and contentwise. Many students did not see a need for writing in the real world. As Atwell (1981) stated, *a child must see a real reason for writing or he will not want to write. In order to* motivate a desire to write, a peer tutoring system was inaugurated. The topics were chosen by the teacher so that they would comply with the conventions of the High School Proficiency Test.

*While using the Holistic Scoring Grid for evaluation, the pre-implementation* scores were inferior and they would not have qualified to pass the state graduation test. The first goal of this practicum was to have the students enjoy the writing process and not just write because it is a required subject. At the *onset of the implementation period the students were questioned about their* dislike about writing. At the end of the implementation period the students were surveyed with a written questionnaire. The survey was designed to see if the students' attitudes about writing improved after peer tutoring implementation. *The results showed that this objective was not met because their desire to write* did not improve as rapidly as the writer thought that it would.

The second objective, that the students' writing ability would show that they

mastered an understanding of what constitutes a well narrative essay was achieved. The intent of the implementation was to improve the scores to a passing grade. By mid-point in the thirteen week period, 57% of the students were averaging above a four which was the passing grade. By the end of the period, 92% were able to obtain a four or better. Thus, this objective was successfully met.

The writer anticipated that all the freshmen would enjoy writing more than they did when they entered ninth grade and that they would have gained many of the basic skills that caused them to be placed in an individualized program. Although this goal showed minimum progress, the objective was met because weekly class grades both in writing samples and in tests were continuously higher. This created some pleasure for the students even though writing continued to create a problem for some of them.

The last goal was that by the end of the implementation period, the students would have the ability to pass the writing portion of the High School Proficiency Test. This objective was achieved with 92% of the students attaining a score of four or better and because of the positive comments by both the "Write Team" and the teachers.

## Discussion

The initial projection was that the students would enjoy the writing process to the point where they would want to write because they like to write and not because they were required to write. Not all of the students reached this plateau, but in answer to the question, "What do you like best in English class?", the results were varied.

Some students did actually say that the thing they liked doing best was writing essays; eleven of the fifty showed a preference for script and essay writing. This was an improvement since the beginning of the term when the overwhelming majority showed a dislike for any form of writing. The results showed that many of the shier teenagers were happier when they were left to do something by themselves. Writing is an activity that they can do alone.

Surprisingly, when asked what they liked doing best in English class, their responses geared towards Spelling, but most preferred when they indulged in reading, whether read to by the teacher, oral reading by the class, or silent reading.

When asked question 2 on the questionnaire, "What do you like least about English class?", nineteen of the sample emphatically let it be known that whether it was book reports, essays, answering questions, or research, they did not like "WRITING".

More than two thirds of the participants agreed that they improved their writing because they worked with a partner or with a group. Brainstorming gave them many ideas to write about. They really learned from others' mistakes and by getting different opinions. They were able to "join thoughts and compare ideas", as they said. Working with others "made the time go faster and caused writing to be fun."

As for "The Write Team", the student reactions were mixed. Their opinions reflected their immaturity. In many cases, if the Seniors gave favorable comments, the Freshmen were happy and thought they were helpful. But, if they did not hear what they wanted to hear, they resented the criticism and said that they were "being intimidated".

Although ten of the ninth graders did not have the confidence in themselves to pass the writing test at that time, the others all thought that they had gained enough knowledge and experience to pass it. Everyone of them agreed that in order to make their writing better, they had to make writing part of their daily schedule and continue practicing.

The students started to write for a purpose. In order to teach the need for writing, the teacher showed them that there are various methods to bring about change, one of which is Letters To The Editor to the newspaper where one can express his feelings. When the editor of the local newspaper published some of the students' letters, "the joy of writing," was experienced by some students. Again, Atwell's ideas were correct...if the student sees a need for writing, he won't mind doing it.

It was hoped that by the end of the implementation period, the students' writing ability would show that they mastered an understanding of what constitutes a well written narrative essay. This would be accomplished if they attained a Holistic score of four or more. Ninety one percent of the students did this by the fourth essay.

The writer anticipated that all the freshmen involved would enjoy writing more than they did when they entered ninth grade. Although the students found it an easier task to do as the term progressed, the questionnaire showed that writing was still not one of their favorite activities. At mid-point in the implementation period, coincidentally, the school administration required that the group be given a practice examination called the Early Warning Test (N. J. 1991). This was a practice test to see if the students were preparing well for the eleventh grade. During the testing period, the negative student reaction and the student

discontent was very apparent, especially when they had the essay writing assignment. Most students did not write enough to qualify for a passing mark. This was partly because they knew that it was only a practice test but it showed that they still did not really enjoy writing.

The students were placed in this class because they lacked many of the basic skills needed for good writing. Although they did not write a lot, nor did they enjoy the process, the quality of their writing did improve. Grammar rules were being followed, common errors were alleviated, students were starting to check and review their work, and spelling was being checked as dictionary use became more commonplace. With each essay written, the student proficiency reached closer to the goal of being able to pass the test. This was shown as the Holistic grades rose higher.

A big sign of encouragement came when the essay on current issues was written as a letter to an editor. Since student violence and crime was becoming a wide spread issue in the media, the teacher instigated a discussion on alternate ways of venting anger. Letters to the Editor of the local newspaper were submitted concerning various issues that were of importance to the students. Peer tutoring played a big part in the writing assignment because students love being able to express their views. Some of the letters were published in the newspaper giving the students a feeling of accomplishment and it provided a boost to their self esteem which is something that minority students really need.

Another great boost to self esteem and a thrust towards confidence came when "The Write Team" reviewed their work. This group, consisted of the Senior English teacher and her students. The compositions were presented to the Seniors without names so that there would be no biased opinions, in case they

knew the students. The Seniors' comments were deemed valuable because they had already passed the High School Proficiency Test and therefore they knew what was expected of them. Each essay was returned to the Freshmen with written criticism by the Seniors. Their comments were mostly complimentary and constructive which inspired them to keep working even harder.

Although some essays were deemed too short, some lacked enough detail and some had too much repetition, most Seniors' replies included such comments as "well written, well developed, good opening sentence, you kept to the topic, had good punctuation, wrote right to the point, had good ideas and showed good organization." When they noticed sentence fragments or other mechanical errors, they gave suggestions for improvement.

The encouragement of the Senior English teacher was very valuable. She stated that she enjoyed reading the Freshmen work. She seemed to think that by the time they reach eleventh grade, with two more years of practice time, they will have the ability to pass the examination.

Nelson (1991) said that kids like classmates to see their writing because youngsters need an audience for their writing. "The Write Team" provided an audience.

The outcomes were met as far as grades were concerned; the percentages of expectation were met and most students expressed the confidence that they had gained the knowledge to pass the test. They improved their basic skills and they showed satisfaction as they earned better grades. The writer's concern is that the students did not come away from this experience with a greater sense of enjoyment for writing. Even though they saw the improvement themselves, the questionnaire showed that writing was still one of the least preferred activities of

the school day.

## Recommendations

1. Before the peer tutoring process can work well with students, it is important that they thoroughly understand the rules and methodology which are to be followed. Underachievers must be shown things step by step, or the time used will be wasted.

2. The teacher must monitor the students closely or they might become sidetracked. During brainstorming time when students are discussing the topics with a partner or with a small group, the teacher must listen lest the students start to socialize.

3. A good method to use in order to assure that students are staying on task is by requiring a written summary of the time spent brainstorming ideas.

4. When they are in groups, each student should be given a responsibility, or else the conversation may become dominated by the more aggressive youngsters while others sit back and do nothing.

5. Sometimes teenagers are shy and they are reluctant to share stories. Discussions among the students may have to be initiated by some questions which are presented by the teacher in order to get the conversation flowing.

6. Let the students keep a graph or a chart of their grades for each essay. As they see their marks improve, it will give them the self esteem needed as encouragement for the next step.

## Dissemination

Throughout the implementation of this practicum, I talked to other teaches in my school about what I was doing with my classes. The Senior Class, which became my "Write Team", decided that they too wanted to try doing some activities in writing, using peers as helpers and guides.

Other English teachers decided that as long as I had success with it, they too would perhaps try it in their classes. Teachers in other disciplines were shown copies of the report of my implementation. The Superintendent of Schools received a copy, with hopes that it will be used district wide. Teachers, administrators, and instructors in our vocational trades were able to share the results of my practicum and everyone displayed support for the program.

"A + For Kids" is a New Jersey - Channel 9 TV Program. In conjunction with some major industries, they sponsor a program to further the curricula of teachers who they think exhibit outstanding ideas. This practicum was chosen as one of the 1992 outstanding plans. It will be used as a sample for teachers throughout the State of New Jersey.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire

Purpose: To see if students' attitudes about writing improved after Peer Tutoring *Implementation.*

1. What do you like best in English classes?

2. What do you like doing least in English classes?

3. Do you feel that working with a partner or in a group has helped to improve your writing? Why or Why not?

4. *How did the upperclassmen and "The Write Team" affect your writing?*

5. What do you think that you can do to make your writing better?

6. Do you feel confident now that you are ready to pass the essay writing portion of the High School Proficiency Test?

## Appendix B

## FORMER HSPT ESSAY TOPICS

## ESSAY TOPIC #1

If you could go back in time, what day or event of your life would you like to live over? Write an essay that tells about that day or event and what made it special.

## ESSAY TOPIC #2

Think about an accomplishment that made you feel good about yourself. It could be something you did for your family or friends, a sporting event you entered, a difficult school subject you mastered, or any other achievement that was important to you. Write an essay describing your accomplishment and how it made you feel.

## ESSAY TOPIC #3

Sometimes first impressions are misleading. Think of a person about whom your opinion has changed. Write an essay describing what you first thought of this person and how your opinion changed. Explain how and why you came to feel differently.

## ESSAY TOPIC #4

Think about a time when you helped someone or someone helped you. It might have been a friend, someone in your family, or even a stranger. Write an essay telling what happened and how you felt about it.

## ESSAY TOPIC #5

Think about a task you have had to perform that you didn't like. It could be a job you have had, a household chore, or something else that you were required to do. Write an essay about the task and why you didn't like it.

## ESSAY TOPIC #6

Sometimes you must ask another person for help. You might ask for directions for doing something, for assistance with a difficult assignment, or for advice with a personal problem. Describe a situation in which you asked for help. How did it make you feel? What help did you ask for? What help did you receive?

## ESSAY TOPIC #7

Sometimes you can learn something from a younger person such as a sister, brother, or friend. It could be a new way to do something or a new way to look at someone - a lesson in life. Write an essay describing a time when you learned a lesson from a younger person. Be sure to include who that person was, what you learned, and how you reacted.

## ESSAY TOPIC #8

Think about a business you might like to own when you finish school. It may be a restaurant, a car dealership, a movie studio, a clothing company, or any other business that interest you. Write an essay telling what the business would be and why you would want to own it.

## ESSAY TOPIC #9

Think about something that happened to you that you did not expect. Write an essay about that unexpected experience. Describe what happened and how you reacted.

## ESSAY TOPIC #10

Think about someone who came to you for advice about a problem. Write an essay telling about that person's problem, about the advice that you gave, and how the advice either helped or hurt.